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ABSTRACT

During the past decade, many American companies have shifted their work styles from classically controlling management styles to self-motivating teams. For this reason, a few communication educators are now exploring alternative models of teaching. If students have the opportunity to experience many of the concepts covered in organizational communication, they will be more likely to remember the information when faced with the same phenomena in the business world. By structuring an organizational communication course around the concept of self-directed teams, students take responsibility for their work and communication, improve their performance, and experience many of the facets of organizational communication. Collaborative or cooperative techniques help students get a better understanding of work in the "real world." In a model, created by both a professor and students, organizational life was simulated for the classroom. Decisions regarding texts, general content, and loosely structured assignments were made by the professor with room for student input. Teams implemented their own rules which were appropriate for members, and the shape of assignments was decided by the class. Student ideas permeated the course content. In their final evaluations, students reported having a positive experience. Probably the most glaring weakness of this model was lack of student motivation, perhaps due to the lack of identification of a concrete shared goal. (Contains 12 references.) (CR)

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Simulating Organizational Life: Self-Directed Teams in the Classroom

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During the past decade, many American companies have shifted their work styles from classically controlling management styles to self-motivating teams. By shifting power from upper-management to employees, organizations are finding ways to increase production in more efficient and creative ways. (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1997; Kilman, 1984; Sashkin & Burke, 1987). Although many businesses are recognizing weaknesses with their traditional systems, communication educators have been slower at recognizing the same issues of control in their own systems. For the most part, how students are prepared to enter the business world has not changed. The traditional method of a teacher lecturing to students still exists in the majority. This model emphasizes instructor control and decision making. Unfortunately, this form of teaching is inconsistent with the trends in many business organizations.

For this reason, a few communication educators are exploring alternative models of teaching. Faculty are looking for ways to involve and motivate students more in the learning process. In traditional pedagogical approaches to organizational communication, professors generally lecture on the material and students write down what they consider to be the important points. In the most innovative models, students are asked to work in groups, participate in experiential activities and/or analyze case studies to further explore ideas. Although these techniques improve student involvement, students still memorize what is needed for the exam and search for the "right" answer in a paper assignment.

While these teaching techniques transmit the content of organizational communication adequately, they do not prepare students to deal with these same issues they are studying once they enter organizational life. In my experiences teaching organizational communication, students are genuinely interested in the topic because they understand they will or do experience the same issues

in employment. This interest motivates students to work harder, but I find myself questioning whether they truly understand the practical implications of the theories so dutifully memorized for exams and/or applied to exemplar cases. For example as we discuss conflict management strategies, we explore the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, how they impact the greater organization as well the individual relationship, and apply them to cases. Yet, I wonder when a student is faced with a conflict situation outside the classroom whether they utilize any of the strategies covered in the course. Personally, I believe they do what feels "right" paying little attention to their course work which covered the complexities of the communication situation and conflict management strategies. If students were faced with "real" and meaningful conflict situations in the classroom, they may better understand the application of what they are learning, and hopefully, be more likely to apply the concepts once in the work force.

I believe that if students have the opportunity to experience many of the concepts we traditionally cover in organizational communication, they will be more likely remember the information when faced with the same phenomena in the business world. This paper, discusses a way to make the class "work" more meaningful through empowering students. By structuring an organizational communication course around the concept of self-directed teams, students will take responsibility for their work and communication, improve their performance, and experience many of the facets of organizational communication. Students will not only discuss organizational communication theory, but they will put many of the ideas into practice as they are asked to create and execute their work groups in a larger organizational context, the class. This paper will briefly discuss the concept of self-directed teams and what progress has been made in education. Then a case study attempting to create a learning organization using self-directed teams in the classroom

will show the benefits and difficulties of this approach from both the instructor's and student's perspective. Finally, ideas for future implementations will be suggested.

Self-Directed Teams

In an effort to improve quality and production, many organizations are moving towards self-directed teams (Barker, Melville, & Packanowsky, 1993; Fisher, 1993; Wellins, Byham, & Wilson, 1991). A self-directed work team is "an intact group of employees who are responsible for a 'whole' work process or segment that delivers a product or service to an internal or external customer" (Wellins, et. al., 1991, p. 3). Team members join together to get the work done. They make their own decisions on how the work will be accomplished, how to improve operations, and how to handle the day to day problems. These are not groups brought together for a special project or purpose. Self-directed work teams work together daily.

The idea behind these work teams is to give the team ownership of a product or service. For example, at the Eastman Kodak Company, a team can be responsible for an entire product line. Traditionally managed work forces organizational members to be focused on one specific part of the overall process. Self-directed work teams generally share duties. Team members can usually do everyone's job. They take a more proactive role in shaping the organization (Fisher, 1993; Wellins, et. al., 1991).

Taking this approach to organizational life gives managers different roles. Instead of controlling and directing employees, managers now coach and facilitate teams (Fisher, 1993; Wellins, et. al., 1991). This change in perspective and structure helps empower employees. By passing on authority and control to employees, managers are helping them have more responsibility and control over their work lives (Wellins, et. al., 1991).

A Shift in Teaching

Currently, educators are asking questions about how to empower students in the classroom so they take a more active role in learning (Boyer, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). Although a majority of teachers still use traditional teaching models which include lecturing, many are changing their approach and considering more collaborative/cooperative approaches in the classroom. A collaborative/cooperative approach to teaching believes that "knowledge is constructed, discovered, transformed, and extended by students" (Johnson, et. al., 1991, p. 1:6). Learning is not something that is done to a student, but an activity the student takes part in. It is the teachers role to find ways for students to become an active participant in their education.

Collaborative/Cooperative techniques help students get a better understanding of work in the "real world." Learning skills and concepts is not as effective if students cannot share and apply them as they interact with their co-workers or other people. Students need the cooperative skills to apply all the information they have learned in college. Yet, in the traditional classroom they are not taught these skills. They are taught to sit and take notes while the professor lectures. This experience does not model what the students will confront when they enter the work world. Instead, cooperative/collaborative learning cultivates teamwork skills as well as individual and group responsibility. Students get a better understanding of what awaits them after college (Johnson, et. al., 1991).

But, collaborative/cooperative learning classrooms still fall short of simulating self-directed teams. With cooperative/collaborative learning classrooms, the teacher controls how and what the students think. Although students work in groups, their goals are still the same; learn the material to get the grade. This approach encourages more discussion of ideas more frequently, but the teacher

still is in control of what and how material is learned. In these classrooms, students still have very little control or ownership over their education.

The Use of Self-Directed Teams in the Communication Classroom

Using self-directed teams in the organizational communication classroom is not a new idea. A few people have attempted to use work teams with varied results (Driskill & Polansky, 1994; Kellett & Smith, 1995). In these efforts, different degrees of responsibility have been given to students ranging from allowing them to design all assignments and the content of the course (Driskill & Polansky, 1994) to the teacher having ultimate control with students taking responsibility for teaching on certain days (Kellett & Smith, 1995). Driskill and Polansky (1994) note that students work suffered in this course due to the amount of control relinquished by the professor. The amount of material covered during their class was not even close to what is typically covered in a semester. Also, the quality of student work was less rigorous because of student control over assignments and evaluation criteria. They felt students did not challenge each other enough in fear of retaliation. In this course, it appears that too much power was relinquished too soon in the face of the current academic culture. Students in Kellett's and Smith's course (1995) seem to experience many of the same problems traditionally seen in team assignments such as dissatisfaction with team composition, grading, feedback. These prior efforts at applying self-directed teams shaped my efforts in implementing self-directed teams into the organizational communication classroom. This effort attempts to improve on the problems of the other two by finding a middle ground.

Creating the Learning Organization

This model attempted to simulate organizational life. The idea was to create a learning organization (Senge, 1990) where the students and professor would create the organization together as opposed to just the instructor. The group as a whole would work together towards achieving the shared goal of learning the about organizational communication. The group would create an organization that wanted to adapt to its needs and continue to expand in creative ways.

The ideal scenario would have been to create an atmosphere with shared decision making for every aspect of the course. But, this is not realistic when students have certain expectations about their education and professors. Moreover, students do not have experience with the subject matter. They are not experts in organizational communication. They cannot decide which topics are most important to learn about and which texts are most appropriate. The confines of a semester do not allow for the education necessary to take over some traditional teaching roles. Some sort of guidance was necessary in areas where students were inexperienced.

Therefore, this organizational simulation actually mirrored reality in the sense that in business the manager solely controls some decisions . No matter how empowering an organization may be, ultimately, authority rests with someone up the hierarchy (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1997). Our current structures do not allow complete empowerment. Therefore, I made decisions regarding texts and general content as well as loosely structured assignments with room for student input. I provided a brief syllabus which was to serve as a starting point. In an effort to empower students and give up control, I discarded traditional rules usually found in a classroom such as attendance policies, participation, and quizzes. My goal was for teams to implement their own rules which were appropriate for members. For the semester, students were responsible for two exams, two group presentations and a group project. The shape of these assignments was decided by the class.

Although students worked in small groups frequently while in school, few are ever trained in team work. Students cannot be expected to work effectively if they do not know how to work together. This course devoted the first three weeks of the semester to the rationale of self-directed teams and team training. Pairing a discussion of the characteristics of effective teams with training activities provided the students with both theoretical and experiential knowledge. In addition, time was set aside throughout the semester for team meetings and further training sessions for topics such as conflict resolution. Plus, students were asked to reflect on the group process. In order for self-directed teams to be successful, the group process needs to be taken as seriously as the product being created.

In addition to the structure I implemented, I also framed the course content within a historical and contemporary context and facilitated discussions with the entire organization. Prior to each week the team in charge of the material would meet with me to inform me on what they were going to address during their presentation. I would then adapt my teaching to complement their choices. In addition, the teams worked on case analyses each week which illustrated the topics being discussed.

My goal as instructor was to serve as a consultant and facilitator. In addition, decisions such as evaluation, examinations, and class rules were created by the organization as a whole. With the exception of the beginning structure, the students had input into every decision.

The Successes of Creating a Learning Organization

The most successful aspect of this model was student interaction and knowledge. In deciding issues such as grading and examination structure, students were forced to rely on lessons learned in other courses. For example, students had to decide how they wanted to be graded on

team projects. My inclination was to split the grade between group performance and individual performance in response to student feedback in other courses. I laid out various options to the students, but told them the decision was ultimately their own. As the students began discussing their fate, many of them argued for a group grade on basis of material they learned in their small group communication course. Applying principles of effective group communication, they felt that sharing only a group grade would lead to more group cohesion. After voting on the issue, a clear majority favored this approach. I heard few complaints about the group process throughout the semester. When the subject of grading was broached mid-semester, no one wanted to change the current system. This process allowed students to use their past course work as well as persuasive skills to pass a class policy. One student summed it up nicely when they said,

> I found it really interesting to see how the different groups worked together to compose the final answer. It reminded me of how an actual organization would run . . . What I found to be the most fascinating part of all this was the way in which all of the groups stayed with their groups and were vocal about supporting what their other group members suggested.

Although I do not think most students were as aware as this one of what they had accomplished, I was pleased to see the organizational community at work.

Another area where the process excelled was in students having a voice. Student ideas permeated the course content. Although I decided the general topics to include; students created presentations and activities to teach the material. Generally, I would frame the topic historically and then a team would take control of the contemporary issues and applications surrounding the topic.

During the semester, we covered a variety of issues and topics I would not normally address. For example, students discussed interviewing skills, effects of childhood socialization on organizational socialization, and stress management skills. All of these topics are important, but they were not ones I would normally cover in the confines of a traditional semester. They even addressed the subject matter in interesting ways. The group discussing stress management used a Winnie the Pooh video to illustrates different types of stress and social support. This structure allowed students to have more of a voice in the topics they discussed.

Finally, most students had a positive group experience in this course. When giving small group assignments, student feedback generally is mixed. However, these students reported having a positive experience. As one student stated in her final evaluation,

> the group presentations were the most beneficial learning tool in the class. For our own projects, we were in complete control of how we wanted to present the information we found, as well as what we wanted to focus our research on. This really mirrored self-directed teams and allowed us to solve the problem creatively.

This is not to say that everything ran smoothly in the groups, but overall they saw the benefits of working with their teams. The one rule I created was that teams could fire individuals who were not performing in a satisfactory manner if they followed a grievance procedure. Only one group expressed the desire to fire an individual and that person agreed they deserved the punishment. IN the end, the group and the individual were still satisfied with the process. Part of the reason for group satisfaction was the training at the beginning of the semester. Students got to know their group members, they create group rules and policies, and discussed how they would deal with

conflict. These are issues most student groups never address. On course evaluations, students requested even more of this type of training.

Future Alterations to the Learning Organization

Although there were many noteworthy benefits to this model, it was a first effort and therefore much was learned about the difficulties of implementing self-directed teams into an organizational communication classroom. Probably the most glaring weakness of this model was lack of student motivation. Idealistically, I assumed that learning the course material would be enough of a motivator for students. Unfortunately this was not the case. Students did not come prepared or ready to participate. One student pointed out, organizations have a shared goal and this one did not. She stated, "[A]nother problem I saw with this class was the lack of goal for the 'organization' and definition of our organization. It was hard to know what the product for the end and even during the semester was going to be." Each student was defining the goal differently or did not even see the goal. Another student said,

> some students are there because they find the subject interesting, others are there as non-majors to fulfill a communication[s] requirement. Other factors such as desire for a good grade, year in school, and ability to work well with others factor in to the general motivation of this class. . . .For me, my goal was to learn, not just to 'get by.'

Although I believe that these same constraints exist in every organization, they certainly need to be addressed in this course. Moreover, a more concrete goal may help create a shared vision.

As many of the students pointed out in a written analysis they did of the course, having one project for the entire organization to work on would help create more of an organizational feel. Students suggested studying one organization or creating a single product. In future semesters, I hope to implement a class project where the students are "hired" by an organization to study a problem. By implementing a course wide service learning project, students can gain "real life" experience and see the course material in action (Braun, 1997).

Another area for improvement in this model is encouraging more horizontal communication between the groups. Students stated that in many respects this resembled other courses where they worked in groups. There was plenty of upward and downward communication, but none between groups. In Braun's (1997) application of service learning to his course, he created a structure where each student was placed in two task groups and the groups relied on each other for information. So, different groups worked on different aspects of the project and were forced to share information. Some modification of this could work well with this model. Although it is not clear whether Braun (1997) had his students making course decisions and taking responsibility for course material in addition to the project, his ideas would start to address some of the difficulties we experienced.

Finally, students struggled with the ambiguity presented with the change from traditional course structure. Since they had never experienced this type of structure, they did not know how to handle it. One student said,

> It was such a change from anything I had experienced on the St. Thomas campus. The culture at St. Thomas is very conservative, and as students and teachers, I think its hard to step away from that. I think students were afraid to take as much power in the classroom as we were asked to.

Another student mirrored this comment when she said, "Students are so used to going to class to get lectured at, and it was very hard to switch gears after having the same basic format for the past 16 years." The students liked the idea, but did not know how to take responsibility . This is an area that will always present a challenge because the current structure does not encourage students to take responsibility.

All in all using self-directed teams in the classroom is a beneficial approach to teaching organizational communication. In addition to being consistent with current perspective in studying organizational communication, this approach is consistent with what students will be facing when they leave the university. Although students may not know how to deal with power and ambiguity, they will be better off for having dealt with them in a safe environment. Many adjustments need to be made to this model. This was a first attempt at trying to create a model that overcomes past weaknesses. However, if our teaching practices are truly going to prepare students for the world that awaits them, this is a necessary approach to take.

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